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**Buena Vista Colored School
Buena Vista, Virginia**

Section 7 Page 1

Summary Description:

Located at the northern edge of the Buena Vista community, the Buena Vista Colored School is a one-story, brick structure with a hipped, sheet metal roof. The oldest part, to the west, dates from 1914 and is a four-bay, two-room section with a brick foundation and water table, and segmental arches over its two front doors. It replaced a presumably similar structure that burned earlier that year. In 1926 a second brick section was added to the east. It added one room and changed the front (south) façade from four bays to seven with the addition of a central door and two flanking windows. The building as a whole maintains a great deal of its historic fabric, and is in generally good condition. To the north, about twenty feet behind the school, is a one-story brick outbuilding with a shed roof, once used to store wood and coal. The school is situated on a city lot, on a corner fronting Aspen Avenue between 30th and 31st streets.

Narrative Description:

The Buena Vista Colored School is a one story, brick structure with a hipped, standing - seam metal roof. The oldest part, to the west, dates from 1914 and is a four bay, two-room section with a brick foundation, a brick water table, and segmental arches over its two front doors. Two 6 over 6 windows flank the two doors. In 1926, a second section was added to the east. The brick division between the two sections is clearly evident in the facades. The 1926 brick section added one room and changed the front, south façade from four bays to seven with the addition of a central door and two flanking windows. The building served as the only local school for African American children in grades 1-7 from 1914 to 1957. It is in generally good condition, although the roof, guttering, and the inside flooring in the newer section needs attention. Located at the northern edge of the Buena Vista community, the original schoolhouse, which was built in 1891 but burned in 1914, shared the site with an African American Baptist church. The church was moved in 1902, and a new schoolhouse replaced the original soon after it burned, in 1914. Today, there are nearby houses and recent apartment buildings, but the school house is situated in a shaded, green area facing south and fronting on a gravel drive.

The brick in the 1914 section of the building is American bond with a 1:6 ratio of headers to stretchers. The 1926 section has a Flemish bond variant with a 1:5 ratio on the front, and stretcher bond on the side and rear, with only one Flemish course six rows up from the foundation. The newer section is also noteworthy for the scattered presence of brick impressed with "Trademark/Glasgow." This brick came from the nearby Glasgow brickyard, but it is unusual to find the impressed side exposed in the wall as it is here. There is evidence of brick red wash over both sections and some penciling lines remain

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in the older, western section. The newer section has a poured concrete foundation that is visible at the southeast corner and along the south and east sides. Originally, there was a central stove flue in the older, western section. This is clearly evident in a ca. 1915 photograph of the exterior. In the 1926 section, an exterior stove flue is centered on the eastern, short wall. A still later flue, with a gray-toned brick now centers the western short wall. Evidence of the original central flue can be seen in the patched work on the tin roof, and in the floor and ceiling of the interior. The fact of the patched section in the present hipped roof is evidence that the removal of the original flue and the addition of the gray-toned brick one on the west happened sometime after 1926 when the entire roof was modified to accommodate the new addition. The cornice for the whole building is formed by boards cut around the protruding common rafter ends. There is evidence that the rafters for the original hip on the older section are still there, since the protruding end at the division between the two sections is angled.

There are ghosts of porches around the doors in both the 1914 and the 1926 sections. The older section's ghost has a peaked roof; the new section one is flat. The ca. 1915 photograph shows the front façade with no porch and with wooden steps leading up to the two front doors. There is also a 1940s photograph of steps leading to a porch with a hipped roof covered in standing-seam metal. The peak profile in the ghost is probably because of this hipped roof.

Another feature of both the front and back facades is the presence of air vents with iron grills at the corners. These are also evident in the ca. 1915 photograph. The newer section has similar vents. The windows throughout are 6 over 6 sash with concrete sills. The doors in the older section have similar concrete sills though they are much weathered at the present. The windows in the 1926 section have similar concrete sills. The ca. 1915 photograph, while not clear enough to tell about the sill material, does indicate windows of exactly the same size and shape as those still present in the older section.

The east side and the west side each have two windows flanking the stove flues and the back, north façade has a six bay appearance with four windows in the older section and two in the newer one.

The front doors in the older, western section have five wooden horizontal panels each. Only one, the western one, now leads into the school; the other was boarded up on the inside sometime in the late 1940s or 1950s when the present interior modifications were

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done. Originally the older, western section had two rooms. The wall division is clearly evident in the flooring but not in the present ceiling. Oral history informants also remember the school in the 1940s as being three rooms (two in the older section, one in the newer one). At some point, post 1940, perhaps when the flue was moved to the end wall, the interior was renovated, the older interior wall in the 1914 section was removed, and the whole building was lined with paneled green chalk boards between the windows and doors. This is true for both the older and newer sections. The interior finish in both parts is plaster against the brick walls. The ceiling is plaster over circular-saw-cut-lathe and is probably post 1940. There are two small openings to the attic in the center of the ceiling of the older part. One is clearly the closed-in flue hole; the other, near it, is even smaller. It may have provided some sort of access for the electrification that was done in 1937. Presently the plaster in the ceiling is missing in several sections due to roof leaks.

The interior wall between the older and newer sections is nine inches thick, indicating it is probably brick. That would explain the clear division between the two sections evident on the outside. Essentially they built a second brick unit and abutted it to the older wall without tying the two walls together except at the roof level. The shared interior wall is plastered and paneled on both sides with chalk boards. The newer section's floor is presently in dangerous condition due to leaks in the roof and an over-loading of storage items. The tongue-and-groove flooring in the older section is in good condition. The interior window moldings in both sections are identical with simple boards, an ovolo profile and a simple, curved, wooden sill. The building never had indoor plumbing or water during the time it served as a school from 1914 to 1957. Sometime, post 1957, a sink was added to the older room.

To the north, about twenty feet behind the school, on the western side is a brick, one story outbuilding with a shed roof. Oral tradition claims this was a storage shed for wood and coal; and another brick structure, now gone, was for the toilets. The surviving building is one brick thick with a front door and two side windows. Five metal straps are nailed into the wood plate of the roof and held by the brick mortar joints two courses below on both the front and the back of the building. The brick in the first thirteen courses of the building is the dark red, Glasgow brick of the 1926 addition while the upper courses are the gray-toned brick of the flue addition indicating the building is probably post 1940. The ca. 1915 photograph shows an out building in a similar position to this one, but it is taller and bigger. Another photo in the same collection shows a wooden outhouse which is now gone.

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Description (continued)

The school sits on one city lot, Section 6, Block 9, Lot 13, which is 50' x 125' and on a corner fronting Aspen Avenue between 30th and 31st streets. A survey done in 2000 for the construction of several apartment buildings on the adjoining lots to the east revealed that the school building extends about 35 feet into what should have been Aspen Avenue, but the street was never completed. Indeed, this whole section of Buena Vista was not developed until recently. The school is a remarkable survival with great historic integrity and enough space around it that landscaping could minimize the impact of the newer neighboring structures.

NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Summary

The Buena Vista Colored School stands today, having changed very little from its beginnings as a one-room brick school in 1914. A second room, almost identical to the first room was added in 1926, and the little school served the city's African American school population in grades 1-7 for forty-four years. When its doors closed in 1957 and a more modern facility was erected closer to the center of the African American community, three generations of African American children had received their elementary education at the Buena Vista Colored School. The building remains a monument to the past, evoking joyful childhood memories of school friends, strict but loving and caring teachers, and the 3 R's, but also recalling less joyful days of a segregated society with a second-class citizenship.

Applicable Criteria

The Buena Vista Colored School meets Criteria A and is eligible in the black ethnic heritage and education areas of significance for its close association with the history of Buena Vista and its African American community for forty-four years. The period of significance extends from the date of the school's construction in 1914 through 1952.

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Acknowledgements

Several individuals contributed their time, expertise, and resources in the completion of this report. Dr. Pamela H. Simpson, Professor of Art History, Washington and Lee University, assisted in writing the architectural description of the school. Jason Miller, working as assistant to Tom Contos, University Architect, Washington and Lee University, provided the drawing of the school. Several former students of the Buena Vista Colored School provided useful oral history of the school, including Irma B. Thompson, Gloria Martin, Claude Sanderson, and Danta T. Johnson. Mrs. Frances Price Ragsdale, teacher at the school, 1935-1957, gave a most helpful oral interview which has been transcribed and available in the archives of the Rockbridge Historical Society. Finally, this report could not have been completed without the untiring support and assistance by the members of the Roanoke Regional Preservation Office. Especially helpful was Michael Pulice, Architectural Historian. Mike made frequent site visits, took the required photos and slides, and guided the writer through each technical phase of the nomination.

Historic Content

The first Buena Vista Colored School was constructed in the fall of 1891 during the height of the "boom" era which had begun in 1889. The first school was a one-room frame building that opened January 25, 1892.¹ The building burned in the summer of 1914 and a one-room brick building was built in the fall of 1914 on the same site at a cost of \$908.23.² A second room almost identical to the first room was completed in 1926.³ The school closed its doors when Park Avenue School opened March 10, 1957.⁴

Statement of Significance

The history of the Buena Vista Colored School is very closely linked with the history of the first African American church in Buena Vista, the First Baptist Church (Colored). Both the first school and the church were constructed simultaneously in 1891 on the same lot.⁵ Encouraging any religious denomination to build a church in the new city, the Buena Vista Land Development Company gave a lot for such purpose. The trustees of the church were deeded lot 13 (50feet x 175 feet) in block 9 of section 6.⁶ The church trustees gave the city permission to build a school on a portion of the lot. The anticipated growth of the African American community in Section 6, particularly around the church and school, failed to materialize. As a result, the church was torn down ten years later

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Statement of Significance (continued)

(1902) and moved to its present location at 2448 Ivy Street in the center of the African American community.⁷

The development of Negro education in Virginia has been traced by two former secondary education supervisors of Negro education at the Virginia State Department of Education, Fred M. Alexander in 1943 and Archie G. Richardson in 1976. The first Buena Vista Colored School belongs to the first of the four developmental periods defined by Alexander and Richardson: "The Initiation and Awakening."⁸ Most schools built in Virginia during this period following the establishment of the free public school system in 1870 were simple one-room buildings of log construction with gabled roof.⁹ Built in 1891, the first Buena Vista Colored School was a simple one-room building of frame, not log, construction. Both the first room (1914) and the second room (1926) of the present Buena Vista Colored School were built during the time referred to by Alexander and Richardson as "Second Period: Development and Accomplishment, 1906-1936." Improvements in the physical facilities were noted during this period. Brick and a tin roof were used in the construction of both rooms of the Buena Vista Colored School.

Organized philanthropy during this period, particularly the Peabody Fund, the John F. Slater Fund, the General Education Board, the Julius Rosenwald Foundation, and the Jeanes Fund, poured millions of dollars into school construction. There is no record or other indication that the Buena Vista School Board received financial aid from any philanthropic organization in the construction of the Buena Vista Colored School.

The only known photograph of the school prior to the addition of the second room in 1926 is found in The Jackson Davis Collection of African American Educational Photographs at the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia.

Jackson Davis, an educational reformer and amateur photographer, took nearly 6,000 photographs of African American schools, teachers and students throughout the Southeastern United States. "Davis created most of the images with a specific purpose in mind: to demonstrate the wretched conditions of African-American schools in the South and to show how the schools could be modernized and improved."¹⁰ The date of the photograph is not given, but it is assumed to be late 1914 or early 1915 while Davis was serving as field agent with the General Education Board, a philanthropic foundation

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endowed by John D. Rockefeller. In addition to the photograph of the one-room school, there is a second photograph of the school's out-house in the collection.

By 1911 the enrollment of the school had increased to 81 with an average daily attendance of 56, making it necessary to employ a second, or assistant teacher for the first time.¹¹ Mr. John Moore was the head teacher with a listed annual salary of \$405; the second teacher, also a male but whose name is unknown received an annual salary of \$240.¹² Records of Buena Vista school board minutes are available beginning in 1915, and Rubie D. James of Petersburg was elected as assistant teacher for the Colored School at a salary of \$30 per month for the 1915-16 school year.¹³

Shortly after a new school was opened in January of 1924 for the city's white students, patrons and friends of the Colored School began to express their interests in a better facility for their children. They met on June 16, 1924, according to a newspaper article, formed an Improvement League "for the benefit and improvement of the colored school" and took a collection of \$26 from twenty-nine donors, with the names of the donors and amount contributed listed in the article.¹⁴

Formal action was taken by the Improvement League when the teachers and patrons petitioned the school board April 13, 1925, to add an additional classroom to their school, "...the Colored People to furnish a large amount of the required money." At the May school board meeting a crowded condition at the school was confirmed, and a committee was appointed to confer with the finance committee of the city council. At its June meeting the school board received three bids for the work ranging from \$750-\$1000. A bid was accepted of "about \$800 the Negroes to raise 1/2 of this amount."¹⁵

The requirement for Negro patrons to raise \$400 as their portion of the cost of the new room was discriminatory; however, it was an accepted practice at this time in the state. A statement such as the following frequently appeared in the section on Negro education in the state superintendent's annual report: "The negroes are expected to contribute a part of the funds for each building in order to show their interest."¹⁶ Salary of teachers was another area of widespread disparity and discrimination in Virginia at this time, a fact that was causing a teacher shortage. "The problem of greatest importance concerning negro education in Virginia is the insufficiency of negro teachers. There are needed about 200 teachers, who are not to be had from any source. While the salaries of negro teachers in some instances is being slightly increased, a great many of the rural teachers' salaries

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Statement of Significance (continued)

are not such as to attract men and women into the profession. Other States are employing many of the best teachers because these States are offering better salaries.”¹⁷

Although African America, teachers were paid less than their white counterparts, Buena Vista was always able to attract well-prepared teachers for the Colored School, beginning with its first teacher in 1891: “Mattie J. Fergerson has been elected teacher for the colored school. She is a resident of Buena Vista, a graduate of Hampton Normal School, and brings strong recommendations from Pulaski, where she formerly taught.”¹⁸

Construction of the second room was delayed when the city engineer discovered that the city did not own the lot on which the school was situated and that the trustees of the First Baptist Church (Colored) had held the title since 1891, when the Buena Vista Development Company gave them the lot on which to build a church.¹⁹ The congregation of the church agreed to turn over the lot to the school board on July 2, 1926, as long as it was used for school purposes.²⁰ The deed was recorded August 3, 1926.²¹ Another possible delay was averted when the school board denied the teachers’ formal request that the location of the Colored School be changed.²² No reason for the desire to change the school’s location was given. However, it is known that the anticipated growth in the area of the school had still not taken place, and the little school stood almost alone in Section 6 near the banks of Chalk Mine Run with the ever-present fear of flooding.

The greatest obstacle to adding the second room was finally overcome when the school board agreed to allow some (unnamed) property owners “...to give their note for the amount in order to hasten matter of building.”²³ The second room was reported as “...completed and ready for occupancy by the chairman of the Building Committee for Colored School” on November 8, 1926, but a request by one of the teachers “...asking for some other improvements to school house and yard was denied, and Board Chairman recommended that colored school league do any further improvements deemed necessary & gave permission for a suitable Dedicatory service to be held.”²⁴

Students who completed grade seven were given a certificate from the Commonwealth of Virginia denoting “the successful completion of the prescribed course of study in the Elementary Schools.”²⁵ Commencement exercises similar to those held for high school graduates were celebrated with songs, recitations, and a valedictory speech, and the certificates were always handed out by the city superintendent of schools.

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Statement of Significance (continued)

African American students had no opportunity to attend high school in the City of Buena Vista until desegregation of the schools took place in 1965. And there was not a high school for African American students in Lexington or Rockbridge County until the Lylburn Downing School opened in Lexington on September 12, 1927.²⁶ Two years of high school were offered at Lylburn Downing School, but only one or two Buena Vista parents could afford the tuition and the fare for the daily train ride necessary to send their children eight miles to the Lexington school. Irma Blake Thompson, a retired teacher with the Buena Vista Public Schools who attended Lylburn Downing School 1930-31 and 1931-32, recalls that the tuition and transportation costs placed a hardship on her parents. She recalled: "I don't remember how much the tuition was. I got to Lexington by the C&O train which left Buena Vista at 7:30 A. M. Before and after school I stayed at the home of friends of the family in Lexington."²⁷

Parents wishing a high school education for their children were relieved of a major part of the financial burden when the school board, acting in response to a petition by the Buena Vista Colored School P.T.A., granted free transportation for students to attend Lylburn Downing High School in Lexington beginning with the 1941-42 school term.²⁸ Payment of tuition by the school board, which had started in 1940-41 for one student, was extended to all students beginning with the 1941-42 term, again in response to a petition by the Buena Vista Colored P.T.A.²⁹ In 1965 African American students in Buena Vista began attending the city's desegregated Parry McCluer High School.

The city finally built a small but modern two-room school nearer the African American community in 1957. Named Park Avenue School, it was dedicated March 10, 1957. The larger of the two rooms was equipped with a stage "to be used as an auditorium and a Negro center."³⁰ Frances Price Ragsdale, a graduate of West Virginia State College who had come to teach at the Buena Vista Colored School in 1935, was named principal and head teacher at the Park Avenue School. When school desegregation came in 1965, Mrs. Ragsdale transferred to the Parry McCluer Elementary School. She retired in 1969, completing a distinguished career of thirty-five years in the Buena Vista public schools.

The school has seen only very limited use since its closing in 1957. The Total Action against Poverty program utilized the original room as a clothing distribution center for a brief period. The local Office of Civilian Defense used the second room during the 1960s to provide training for local civil defense volunteers, and the American Red Cross has stored a field hospital there for emergency use, particularly during times of flooding in the city.

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Statement of Significance (continued)

A small group of African American and white citizens of Buena Vista met in June, 2001, to explore ways to save the Buena Vista Colored School. The group received approval from the City of Buena Vista Council and the Public Works and Safety Committee to restore the school as a museum and community center and were given a ninety-nine year lease.³¹ The Buena Vista Colored School Historical Society was organized May 30, 2002, with twenty charter members.

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Endnotes

1. Buena Vista Advocate, September 19, September 25, October 1, and October 25, 1891; January 25, 1892.
2. Buena Vista City Council Minutes, September 1, 1914 and June 10, 1915.
3. Buena Vista School Board Minutes, April 13, May 11, June 8, and October 12, 1924; April 12, June 12, July 2, October 12, and November 8, 1926.
4. Diehl, George W. A Brief History of Public Education in Rockbridge County, Lexington, and Buena Vista, 1748-1980. The News-Gazette: Lexington, Va., 1980, 106.
5. Buena Vista Advocate, September 25, 1891.
6. Rockbridge County Deed Book 74, 370, February 5, 1892. Buena Vista was chartered as a city February 15, 1892; thereafter deeds were recorded in Buena Vista.
7. "The History of the First Baptist Church," unpublished brochure for the Centennial celebration of the church, 1991.
8. Alexander, Fred M. *Education of the Negro in Virginia*. The Southern Association Foundation, Inc.: Washington, D.C., 1943; Richardson, Archie G. *The Development of Negro Education in Virginia, 1831-1970*. Richmond Virginia Chapter Phi Delta Kappa: Richmond, 1976.
9. Kern, John. *Thematic Evaluation of County Public Schools in Southwest Virginia*. Virginia Department of Historic Resources: Roanoke, 2000, 5-6.
10. Link, William A. *Jackson Davis and the Lost World of Jim Crow Education*. Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library: Charlottesville, 2000, 5-6. The author notes that Jackson Davis in 1910 was appointed as the first State Agent for Negro Rural Schools for the Virginia State Department of Education.
11. *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction 1911-1912*. Virginia State Department of Education, Superintendent of Public Printing: Richmond, 1912, 168. With the addition of the second teacher the Annual Report began to list the school as

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having two rooms. A smaller room that had been partitioned for a supply room and cloakroom was now used as a classroom.

12. Ibid, 171
13. Buena Vista School Board Minutes, September 19, 1915.
14. *Buena Vista News*, July 4, 1924.
15. Buena Vista School Board Minutes, April 13, May 11, and June 8, 1925.
16. *Annual Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction 1923-24, 1924-25*. Virginia State Department of Education, Superintendent of Public Printing: Richmond, 1925, 38.
17. Ibid.
18. *Buena Vista Advocate*, October 12, 1891.
19. Buena Vista School Board Minutes, June 8, 1925.
20. Buena Vista School Board Minutes, July 2, 1926.
21. Buena Vista School Board Minutes, August 3, 1926.
22. Buena Vista School Board Minutes, April 12, 1926.
23. Buena Vista School Board Minutes, June 12, 1926.
24. Buena Vista School Board Minutes, November 8, 1926.
25. Quoted from certificate presented to Norman Alexander Twitty, May 30, 1940.
26. Diehl, 45.

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Endnotes (continued)

27. Lynn, Francis W. *Fessier McCluer: The Life and Times of J. Parry McCluer*. The News-Gazette: Lexington, 2001, 86.
28. Buena Vista School Board Minutes, April 12, 1941.
29. Buena Vista School Board Minutes, May 12 and September 15, 1941.
30. Diehl, 106.
31. Buena Vista City Council Minutes, September 28 and October 24, 2001.

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Verbal boundary description

The school sits on one city lot, Section 6, Block 9, Lot 13, which is 50' x 125' and on a corner fronting Aspen Avenue between 30th and 31st streets.

Verbal boundary justification

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the school.

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